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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a grounded theory study that developed an explanatory theory of influences on teachers' use of classroom discussion. This paper further suggests that grounded theory of this sort should be useful for studying the persistence of recitation under the guise of discussion and for improving instruction with classroom discussion. This study re-analyzes the data of a prior study (1997) which clarified that teachers' thinking about classroom discussion is complex; teachers have multiple conceptions of classroom discussion. A purposive sample of six high school social studies teachers was selected for this study all claimed to use discussion as part of their teaching strategies, and all were nominated by building principals as being thoughtful and effective teachers. Participants taught at suburban (primarily Caucasian) high schools or at urban (racially diverse) high schools. Data were of two kinds: responses to an interview schedule and responses during a think-aloud task. Analysis of data consisted of the following four stages: categories were generated, attempting to identify common themes; categories were integrated along with their properties; data were integrated around fewer, more encompassing categories; and a "theory-in-process" of teachers' conceptions of discussion was written. Findings suggest five factors that influence teachers' uses of different conceptions of discussion: (1) student diversity; (2) lesson objectives; (3) age and maturity of students; (4) sense of community in the classroom; and (5) interest level of students. This study contains implications for teacher education, for the classroom teacher, and for future educational research. Contains 39 references. (BT)

INFLUENCES ON SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' USE OF CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

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Introduction

While any subject area may use discussion, Gross and Zeleny (1958) emphasized the specific role of social studies in teaching classroom discussion: "Since adult organizations so often make decisions with respect to policy by means of the discussion method it is difficult for a teacher of the social studies to over-emphasize (discussion techniques and procedures) in the classroom" (p. 484). With its connection to social interaction and civic participation, the social studies are thought to benefit greatly from classroom discussion (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Gross & Zeleny, 1958).

In a summary of literature about the use of discussion in instruction, Gall (1985) reported that discussion is an effective way to promote higher level thinking, develop student attitudes, and advance student capability for moral reasoning. In short, discussion provides opportunities for student thoughtfulness about the information received in class (Newmann, 1988). It is characterized as a structured conversation among participants who present, examine, compare and understand similar and diverse ideas about an issue (Wilen & White, 1991). Even with these benefits known, discussion infrequently occurs in classrooms.

I report a grounded theory study. My objective was to develop an explanatory theory of influences on teachers' use of classroom discussion. Additional detailed descriptions from teachers will lead to the construction of a detailed set of "grounded hypotheses" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A grounded theory of this sort should be useful for studying the persistence of recitation under the guise of discussion, and to improving instruction with classroom discussion.

A prior study (Larson, 1997) clarified that teachers' thinking about classroom discussion is complex; teachers have multiple conceptions of classroom discussion. While the purpose of that study was to report on teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion, a number of factors that influence the type of discussion they used emerged during the analysis. These influencing factors appear to be integral to the conceptions. In the present study, I re-analyze this data to examine these influences.

Literature

The Persistence of Recitation Over Discussion

Teacher questioning similar to recitation is both accepted and widely used in schools. Questioning that is more in-line with discussion does not appear to be used by teachers very often. Teachers likely misuse the term "discussion" when they are really referring to lectures, recitations, or other types of teacher-dominated classroom interaction (Dillon, 1984). Teachers describe discussion as a favorable method of instruction that encourages students and teacher to interact together about a particular issue. However, while it is viewed favorably, discussion is not used very often in classrooms. Recitation persists (Goodlad, 1984; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Stodolsky, Ferguson, & Wimpelberg, 1981) and is "seemingly invulnerable to repeated criticisms" (Cazden, 1988, p. 30). Often, junior and senior high school teachers and college teachers claim their recitations are really "discussions."

Choosing to use recitation instead of discussion provides teachers' with a greater sense of control over classroom management. Discussion may require teachers to relinquish to students more of their authority over the instructional process than recitation or questioning. Interactions among students, and between the teacher and students, is an assumed component of classroom discussions. While discussion takes many different forms in the classroom (Dillon, 1988; Larson, 1997; Roby, 1988), it requires some degree of talk by the students as well as the teacher. Wood and Wood (1988) found that teachers could control opportunities for student participation by the questions they asked. With their questions, teachers controlled who talked and the content of the talk. Recitation "(i)nsures that children are unlikely to diverge from the teacher's line of thought" (Wood & Wood, 1988, p. 294). However, Wood and Wood concluded that a consequence of this insurance was that teacher questions stifled student initiative, and served more as a form of "group control" than as a stimulus for thought. While recitation can challenge students to use information above low-level thinking (e.g., by asking "why" or "how" questions), it typically limits opportunities for students to use higher-level thinking skills because of its tendency toward rapid questioning and constant teacher evaluation of student responses. Discussion research reveals that increases in teacher/student interactions may produce concern about teaching a specific curriculum in a predetermined time period (Gall, 1985; Gall & Gall, 1990; Wilen, 1990; Wilen & White, 1991). These factors may lead teachers to use less interactive methods of instruction. This research does not fully reveal teacher thinking about which aspects of discussion cause concern

about losing control of the classroom, or what characteristics of discussion cause them to see it as ineffectual for teaching a curriculum emphasizing facts and skills.

It has been suggested that the educational objectives and the curriculum of some schools run counter to discussion (Cazden, 1988; Dillon, 1994). Gall and Gall (1990) represented this belief with the following criticism:

> The American curriculum tends to be fixated on content coverage and lower cognitive objectives...Given this limited instructional focus, it is probably more effective to use methods such as lecture, recitation and seatwork than have students engage in discussion (p. 42).

Possibilities of Classroom Discussion in Democracies

If citizens are to engage in discussions that allow for the development of opinions and positions on issues common to a group, then competence in the skills of discussion is required. Why do public discussions of important issues affecting families, communities, and nation infrequently occur? No simple answer is possible. However, one of the many reasons for a lack of talk could be that citizenship does not require the skill or the "know how" to engage in public talk about important policies or issues (Barber, 1989, 1984). Possible discussion skills include listening, clearly making claims, supporting claims with facts, helping a group move through obstacles, critiquing ideas and not individuals (keeping a high respect for human dignity), and developing together a shared understanding of the problem or issue (Barber, 1984; Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996). If skill in discussion can enhance public talk among democratic citizens, then identifying discussion skills is needed.

Discussion may best be taught by allowing students to interact together about a concern common to them. During their interactions they practice with discussion skills and ultimately make decisions as a group. As such, they begin taking the role of democratic citizens.

The educational systems of democratic societies serve a vital role in developing discussion abilities in children. Bridges (1987) is direct:

> (I)t seems reasonable to expect that an education which is intended, among other things perhaps, to initiate young people into (democratic) processes should include preparation in the art of discussion or more specifically those forms of discussion associated with the processes of deliberation and decision making (p. 35).

The classroom, thought of as a laboratory of democracy (Dewey, 1916), holds the potential for students of different race, gender, social status, and ability to learn how to engage one another in discussions about issues of common concern. The classroom is an appropriate location to

develop democratic character because it can become what Rosenblum (1994) calls a "diverse social identity group":

> (D)emocratic character is said to be formed in diverse social identity groups...these groups forge an inclusive democratic community. The thought is not that social and cultural group differences...must be tolerated; rather, they are positive forces for democratic character and commitment in their members (p. 87).

Student differences--gender, ability level, and language proficiency, for example--could limit the use of discussion in the classroom. For example, the concern that girls receive less help from teachers, less encouragement to interact with the teacher or other students, and more criticism than boys is well documented (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker, Sadker, & Long, 1993). Additionally, average and high ability students are more likely to receive a challenging curriculum and be taught with more thought-provoking methods of instruction than low ability students (Metz, 1978, Oakes, 1985, Page, 1991). And, the tendency for most verbal interactions and written material to be in English presents potential restrictions for the increasing number of limited English-speaking children enrolling in our schools. Equal access to an equal education is critical to a democratic society that desires informed interactions among its citizens. Public talk will benefit. Schools, however, are hard pressed to determine ways to both accommodate student differences and provide an equitable education to each student. Some of the benefits of schools as laboratories of democracy are not likely to be accomplished if diverse students do not interact with one another in the classroom.

Before descriptions and recommendations of classroom discussion proceed much further, it should be helpful to explore teachers' thinking about discussion. Of particular interest is why teachers choose to not provide students with opportunities to interact verbally with one another, given the potential benefits of using discussion. Rather than observing teachers, examining their thinking might provide insight to the age old complaint about the persistence of recitation over discussion. While a few studies define discussion from a teacher or student perspective (Athanases, 1993; Marshall, 1989; Miller, 1990), discussion is typically defined by researchers without benefit of teachers' views. Accordingly, I decided to examine the conceptions of social studies teachers, for whom the recitation/discussion confusion is a very old problem.

The primary research question for this study was:

What components of the educational setting influence teachers' planning and use of discussion?[1]

To examine this, I first explored teachers' conceptions of discussion in high school social studies classes, and the characteristics that teachers consider are typical of classroom discussions.

Method

Teachers/Informants

A purposive sample of six high social studies teachers was selected for this study. All claimed to use discussion as part of their teaching strategies, and all were nominated by building principals as being thoughtful and effective teachers. Teaching assignments were similar, with each participant teaching one or more of the following high school social studies courses: world history, United States history, current events, American government, sociology, or psychology.

The participants taught at one of two schools: a suburban, primarily Caucasian, high school (three teachers); or, an urban (inner-city), racially diverse, high school (three teachers). Similarities in a sample are helpful for generating initial categories (conceptions of discussion) and properties, and for establishing conditions under which a category exists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was my approach when choosing my first sample; the three teachers at the suburban high school. The initial categories were best expanded, refined, and elaborated upon by adding a second sample that was different from the first sample. The teachers at the urban school were chosen for this purpose. They taught students living in a community that was different socio-economically and ethnically from the first sample group, and they taught students with different abilities than the first sample set. Two sample groups provided data from teachers who had diverse backgrounds and teaching experience, worked in diverse communities, and taught diverse students. All of the teachers were Caucasians.

Teachers at the suburban high school taught either "regular track" or honors classes. I will refer to them as: Alex, Bill, and Cathy. "Alex" is 46 years old and has taught U. S. and world history and advanced placement U.S. history for 22 years. He has both an undergraduate and master's degree in history. "Bill," is 40 years old and has taught 11th grade U.S. History and 12th grade current events courses for all his 18 years of teaching. He has an undergraduate and a

[1]"Educational setting" is comprised of four classroom commonplaces: teacher, students, subject matter, and milieu of the school and classroom (Schwab, 1973)

master's degree in history. "Cathy" is 44 years old and has taught U.S. and world history, psychology, and sociology for 22 years. She has an undergraduate degree in English, with a minor in social science, and a master's degree in secondary education.

Teachers at the urban high school taught either "low track," "regular track," or honors classes. Their names are Deborah, Elaine, and Frank. "Deborah" is 50 years old, and has taught 14 years. The past five years she has taught U. S. history in self-contained, special education classrooms. She has an undergraduate degree in education with a minor in United States history, a special education teaching certificate, and a master's degree in early childhood special education. "Elaine" is 40 years old and has taught U. S. history, and sociology for 20 years. She has an undergraduate major in sociology with a minor in history and a teaching credential in secondary social science. She has a master's in counseling, "Frank" is 55 years old and has taught advanced placement U. S. history, honors American government, and regular-track U. S. history courses during his 25 year teaching career. He has an undergraduate degree in political science, and a master's in educational administration.

Data Gathering

Data were of two kinds: responses to an interview schedule and responses during a think-aloud task. Interviews preceded the think-aloud task. In the *interview,* the teachers spoke directly about their conceptions and definitions of discussion. They described the mental image that came to mind when they heard the term classroom discussion, distinguished between an ideal discussion and an imperfect one, gave examples of discussion, and listed educational rationales for discussion. The *think-aloud* exercise was an additional technique to explore these teachers' notions of ideal discussions. Following a technique suggested by Anderson (1980), five vignettes of classroom interaction, each a paragraph long, were composed. These drew on Roby's (1988) five-level model of discussion. Each vignette describes a classroom discussion in one of five teachers' classrooms (Jim, Kerry, Jack, Chris, Brian). Jim's vignette describes a "quiz show" (similar to recitation), Kerry's a "problematical discussion," Jack's an "informational discussion," Chris' a "dialectical discussion," and Brian's a "bull session."[2]

The teachers were asked to order the vignettes from the one most like a discussion in their classroom to the one least like it, thinking aloud and sharing their reasoning all the while. Then, using their top ranked vignette, the teachers were asked to sketch on a seating chart the interaction patterns they thought would occur during such a discussion, again thinking aloud. These lines

[2]These vignettes are presented, and described further, in a previous article (Larson, 1997)

depicted the verbal interactions between teacher and student, student and teacher, and student and student.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data consisted of the following four stages. First, I generated categories by examining collected data, attempting to identify common themes in the data. This was the constructive phase of data analysis where I read the transcriptions and created initial categories. The second stage involved the integration of categories and their properties. During this stage, I compared similarities and differences among the categories created in stage one. Some categories combined with others that had similar properties. The third stage further integrated the data around fewer, more encompassing categories. This process entailed: creating new categories, refining (sharpening) categories, and elaborating (further illustrating) existing categories. These first three stages did not necessarily follow this linear progression. Typical of this method of analysis, these stages formed a repetitious process of coding, comparing, and refining (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparison of data led to the fourth stage of data analysis: writing a "theory in-process" of teachers' conceptions of discussion. These conceptions, abstracted from the data, are then available for comparisons with other samples that provided additional sources of data. This analysis procedure has been illustrated with data from the first sample set in a previous publication (Larson & Parker, 1996).

Findings

Teachers are aware that discussion requires student involvement. When they plan discussion, they reflect on factors that may hinder student participation. I describe five factors that influence teachers' uses of different conceptions of discussion:

1. Student diversity
2. Lesson objectives
3. Age and maturity of students
4. Sense of community in the classroom
5. Interest level of students

According to the canons of the grounded theory approach, I present these as hypotheses that are grounded in data and tentative, pending additional rounds of data gathering and analysis. As such, they provide an initial layer of understanding about the thinking of teachers as they consider planning for, and teaching with discussion. Because they are hypotheses, I use the present tense

and speak generally of "teachers" rather than of "these six teachers." Each influencing factor is presented along with segments from the interview and think aloud transcripts. I provide data to illustrate each category, and to reveal how the categories were developed. Segments of field notes and quotations provide evidence that the categories are well grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Teachers seem to consider these factors when they think about the appropriateness and effectiveness of teaching with discussion.

1. Student Diversity

Teachers see student diversity--differences in areas such as cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability--positively and negatively. Diversity offers the potential for an increased awareness of different perspectives and ideas. Students with different backgrounds may provide a wide range of viewpoints about an issue. As Alex mentioned, if no one had a different perspective or point of view than his, then the discussions would quickly end, and the teacher would be "pontificating by himself" without presenting alternative perspectives on a topic. Diversity also has social benefits. Three teachers saw the classroom as a location where students were required to interact with classmates they typically do not have contact with during the school day. A diverse classroom could be the only place students will hear perspectives and opinions from those who do not represent their point of view.

Contrasting these positive benefits, teachers think that student diversity increases conflict and disagreement when students question and challenge one another. This often results because students do not understand other students who are different from them, be it a point of view or ability level. Teachers report that they talk more, and begin to dominate the classroom interactions, when their students become embroiled in conflict. By limiting student talk, teachers control the voicing of different ideas and opinions.

While student differences seem to impact the teacher *during* discussions, they also lead teachers to *plan* lessons differently from class to class. In mentioning the diversity of students and personalities in his classroom, Alex said that "classrooms have personalities...I can't do the same thing with one class that I can do with the other; it's just the mix." Similarly, though Frank recalled that he often planned to have the same discussion in two different classes, it did not necessarily happen that way: "Even though there are only two or three different courses, everything seems to be different with each of my classes."

Part of "the mix" has to do with gender, and teachers encourage equal participation between boys and girls by altering instructional techniques. Bill was quite direct about gender, commenting that girls and boys talk differently. He said boys talk more frequently, but when girls do talk it is after more reflection. He explained that "boys tend to just spout off and not necessarily think through what they are going to say whereas girls really have thought through it ahead of time." He attempted to overcome the high frequency of talk from boys by directing his comments to girls and telling his classes about his observations of gender differences during discussions.

Elaine's comment was similar: "Women aren't as willing to voice opinions...I think that unless you teach the boys to listen to the girls, and teach the girls to speak, we won't lose the gender thing." She mentioned that girls may feel especially intimidated when they are in discussions with exuberant, loud boys. She recounted a time when two girls were asked to give an opinion after three loud boys gave theirs: "you hardly heard the girls who followed them, real quiet, real hurried, like they didn't think anybody was listening."

Only one of the teachers I interviewed, Frank, did not believe gender differences were a concern during classroom discussions. He said that boys and girls may have different ideas but are equally able to present their ideas and questions to the class. He does not recall gender differences creating problems among his students, though he is aware that "literature" about gender inequity is present: "I'm aware that a lot of folks are saying that you reward guys, and that you have different standards for girls. I have had no complaints about this from my students."

Gender and cultural background are not the only differences teachers notice among students. Students may refuse to engage in classroom discussions, believing their contributions are not valued by the class. Teachers think that students choose to not to participate because they feel they are in some way "different" from the rest of the class, are shy, represent a minority view, differ racially from the majority of the class, or because they believe they do not have a voice in society. This concerns teachers because discussion is meant to encourage participation and learning, not thwart it. Alex's comment, though replete with generalizations, expresses how gender and racial or ethnic background might affect a classroom discussion:

> Some kids are workers and they don't like to talk..I mean I can think of some girls who always hand in their homework assignments, always do this, but don't talk...generally I find kids of certain minority backgrounds [Korean, Chinese] don't speak very much, they don't like controversy.

Some students "back out completely" from Cathy's discussions. "And the worst thing," she says, "is that they feel they are shut down and shut out of the system. They don't count, they don't fit, they don't belong...and I really don't think that you're going to get those kids [to discuss]. Maybe, maybe sometimes you'll bring them into a discussion. I have a couple [African-American students] that I guess might get close to that level, but they are belligerent..they're angry." Cathy said she tried to deal with these feelings of anger and oppression by discussing it in the class. She has yet to be satisfied with the results, and believes it may be a result of the racial imbalance that is present in her classrooms (which consist of predominately white students). In addition to discussing these feelings, Cathy described how she positioned the chairs in her room in a semicircle to create a more informal setting and place the students closer to each other. Again, she was not convinced that this did any good in "bringing together" students who felt separated from the group.

A lower proficiency in the English language, according to teachers, limits what a student is able to share during a discussion. When students with low language competence are in a class with students who are fluent in English, students with greater speaking ability dominate the verbal interactions. Frank said he found that language and culture play a powerful role in determining who talks:

> [Students] come from different groups, and culturally it's really difficult to say who's to talk. Some kids aren't as comfortable [talking] as others. Some are uncomfortable [talking] because they don't have a grasp on the language...with a lot of kids here English is their second language. Especially when a lot of the Asian cultures are so much less individualistic... Sometimes talk is just...hard for them to do.

Deborah described two students who did not talk during discussion. One boy was reticent about talking because his "thoughts come slowly:"

> I don't think he's slow in IQ or whatever, but whatever it is, he doesn't process very fast. When you get talking to him one on one, he often has insights. They're just marvelous. But [during discussions], he's terrified because he just knows he would become confused and distressed.

The other boy participates freely and is very verbal when in a special education class. However, "in mainstreamed classes...if you ask him a question he will answer you, but he rarely initiates anything...He's intimidated."

2. Lesson Objectives

Discussion is considered to be a time-consuming method of instruction relative to other methods. Therefore, teachers are more directing or controlling, and are more likely to dominate the interactions with their students during discussions, when their lesson objectives emphasize "covering" or "getting through" a predetermined amount of information. Alex, for example, when teaching an advanced placement United States history class, reported that he did not use discussion when he had to cover a large amount of information in a short time.

When students already possess information a teacher believes is important, or have spent time gathering background information before a classroom discussion, teachers assume a less dominant role. They also loosen control when they do not feel pressured to present a specific amount of information. They are more willing to allow extra time for student interactions because they believe discussions assist student learning. Alex's comment typified the other teachers' comments about this: "you can't rely on the kids to read these days, or to take very good notes...so they need to be able to interact and play with the information to figure it out."

Teachers' belief that students are becoming increasingly less willing to read affects teachers' attitudes about using discussion in the classroom. If a reading assignment provides students with important information for a discussion, then students who have not read are not prepared to engage in discussion. As Bill stated:

> These young men and women could have the finest writing skills, the finest public speaking skills, they could have confidence that would be equated to a mid-management person at Boeing, but without knowledge they have nothing to talk about (emphasis his).

He credited the research and reading that his students did for the success of a particular discussion about free trade agreements:

> if I would have given them just one or two resources to read and use, this discussion would not have had anywhere close to the depth that it had. I mean I had a forty-foot-long printout that I got from Info-Trak, and then I had gone through and highlighted potential articles for them to read.

Bill's requirements of his students do not seem to be the norm. Other teachers reported that they did not expect students to read and prepare to this extent, and often allowed class time for students to prepare. Teachers are frustrated by a lack of preparation by students. This led Elaine to go as far as doing "choral readings" with her classes before discussions: "I know that [reading together out loud] sounds 'babyish,' but I do it with them because those who haven't read are at a

loss. So, I feel like, let's just do it right then and there." Cathy recalled that she increased the frequency of discussions about "textbook information" as a way for students who have read to share information with those who have not: "Students are reading less and less. If they are going to read less, then they are going to have to discuss more."

Student knowledge about the topic of the discussion influences teachers' lesson objectives and conceptions of discussion. When students know less, teachers feel the need to be more active in the discussions, which leads to less interactions among students. Teachers want all of their students to know important points about the topic being discussed, but students who know more tend to discuss more. As Alex said, "certain kids know all the answers and they dominate discussions, and the other kids don't learn...You can learn only so much by listening to all but one person answer all the questions, right?" (Then there are students who know very little, but will, as Elaine said, "spout off from the top of their head.")

Bill said that before most of his discussions, his students needed time to read and research the information they would be discussing. He commented on one particular discussion that he felt was very successful:

> What has really made this dialogue, this discussion, as rich as it was is the painful research that we did. [The students] went in and they may have looked at two hundred articles between them, and then ultimately brought all of that back into this arena.

Teachers report that absent students pose a great problem for using discussion. Students cannot "make up" the absence because the class discussion can not be recreated. When teachers present information by following a specific outline or "notes," absent students may be able to copy the information when they return to school. Merely copying down the teacher's notes is insufficient, however, if discussion is thought of as a technique that allows students to build their own understanding of an issue through verbal interactions. Teachers think that distributing information about a previous discussion is an inadequate way for absent students to "catch up," because much of the information is provided during the discussion. Recounting what happened during a discussion to an absent student is difficult for teachers because they do not believe they can represent the exchange of ideas and knowledge-building that may have occurred. As Elaine stated, "They gotta be there...I do have kids who come in and say, 'I missed two days, I was sick, what did we do?' And I just don't know where to start."

3. Age and Maturity of Students

Teachers do not use discussion in the same way across their several classes. They discriminate, more likely conducting discussion in classes that have what they call more "mature" students--students they describe as some combination of older, more knowledgeable, less defensive, and more socially adept. Students' maturity is also a consideration when teachers decide how much control they will exert during a discussion. Less mature students lead teachers to assume a more controlling position (as in recitation); more mature students encourage teacher participation from a less controlling position (as in open-ended conversations).

Cathy, Alex, Frank, and Elaine each reported that the students in the lowest grade level at their school were prone to adopt a specific opinion and argue it without listening to others, and without taking other points of view into consideration. Cathy's comment is representative of the others:

> sophomores [more so than seniors] argue...more than discuss. They argue...there is a need to be right, and be heard...The less mature, or the younger (students), are less likely to have the ability to "give up" favorite and long held opinions.

Elaine suggested that discussions were difficult with younger students because they "need so much structure." She has had limited success engaging ninth-graders in open-ended discussions. The need to continuously direct students toward the topic being discussed, and emphasize socially acceptable behaviors during discussion, made it difficult for Elaine to concentrate on her topic. Similarly, Deborah reported that immature behavior limited her ability to plan a discussion, because her students had difficulty interacting with one another:

> I spend so much time at it [correcting inappropriate behavior] that I never feel like we get the time to really interact in any kind of full way. We barely get a thought down and it is gone. There is no time to finish whatever it is. My focus seems to be so much on the relational [social] aspect of dealing with these students that it doesn't seem to get to the subject or the content... Once I told them that my grandfather didn't practice medicine for six years after the Civil War...he said "you don't live in a bloodbath and forget it." We began to examine the horrors of war. They listened to that. A pin could have dropped. And then we tried to talk about it, and one kid started talking about blood and gore and shooting people's heads off. And that was the end of the discussion.

Teachers emphasize that maturity is related to the type of discussion they select. Whether a discussion is an "exchange of ideas" or a "debate," often is the result of the amount of maturity that teachers believe their students have. More maturity is needed when the purpose of the verbal interactions is to express different perspectives and increase students' general understanding about

a particular topic (exchanging ideas). Less maturity is necessary if the nature of the interactions focus on winning, or on competing against opposing viewpoints (debate).

Bill expressed this idea when he explained that older students often are more mature and thus can "step away from the discussion" and not be solely focused on presenting their personal view. He emphasized that students need skills in discussing, and that these skills require instruction. He suggested that younger students are capable of discussing, but need to know "how to participate" in classroom discussions. He contended that those discussions relying on student input require "quite a bit of practice in learning how to discuss." During an interview, Bill mentioned that age differences of high school students will not pose much of a problem for discussion provided that the students receive direction about how to discuss:

> I think age has something to do with it [the ability of students to engage in discussions], but the chronological differences between sophomores, juniors, and seniors is not so great that good tutelage can't overcome.

Another way in which the maturity of students is a factor pertains to their previous experience with classroom discussion. Students who have rarely shared their ideas verbally with others in a classroom lack an understanding about how to do so. As a result, they act defensive, argue, and debate with one another during classroom discussions. Alex suggested that sophomores insist on sticking to their opinion because they lack experience critiquing information presented to them by a teacher, a textbook, or by classmates:

> (Students) have never been taught to think themselves, they don't take the time to read a sentence out of a text and disagree with it or question. They just take it for granted. They are looking for facts instead of asking "why." That is difficult for discussions.

Elaine also described how previous experience with classroom discussion helps students become more mature discussants:

> They are not used to us (teachers) giving them the ball. So often teachers will present the stuff and not have very many people answer (the teacher's) questions...So then, when we want them to think on their own, they get really nervous.

Teachers are faced with a dilemma: they are hesitant to plan discussions when their students act immaturely, but they believe that immature discussants need to engage in discussions if they are to become more skilled at it.

Teachers implement rules for classroom discussion when they want more control over immature students, but generally the rules are kept to a minimum. Other than to listen and respect their classmates' rights to share their opinions and ideas. They often do not teach a specific list of "do's and don't's." Teachers emphasize the intent of rules, rather than the rules themselves. Elaine accomplished this through explicit instruction:

> I spend a lot of time at the beginning of class teaching them about respect and about listening, and that it is important to have a voice and also to let others to have a voice, and the whole process of discernment.

Alex recalled telling his students to respect others and not offend classmates:

> It's very essential that they respect each others' ideas...I tell them I don't care what you say as long as it's not personal, against anyone here at school, anybody in this classroom, against your teacher, and it's within good taste, you can go ahead and say it.

To encourage more listening, they limit student interactions by requiring such behaviors as raising a hand before talking, and responding to the teacher rather than directly to a classmate. The interactions among students are thus mediated by the teacher, who grants permission for students to speak. This is done at the expense of discussion so students will hear their classmates' thoughts and ideas. Alex described students' inability to listen leads to additional rules: "I have a problem with my sophomores [in that] they won't listen to each other. They tend to get angry...kids have a problem with not accepting other people's opinions. There's a real lack of open-mindedness. I think it is very essential that they respect each others' ideas."

4. Sense of Community in the Classroom

Another factor influencing teachers' use of discussion is the degree to which a sense of community develops in the classroom. "Community" is comprised of attributes such as: trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, common goals for exploring issues and course-content together, and an appropriate size of the group. When teacher and students view the class as a community, they are more inclined to interact with one another. Teachers, for example, may use discussion during first period, but not use it during second period because of a different sense of community present in the second group of students.

Inherent in this idea of a classroom community is the need to respect and trust people, something that does not happen without effort by the teacher and willingness by the students. Teachers make efforts to earn students' trust, and students are held accountable to respect their classmates. Elaine said this was a training process: "I train them from the beginning to become a learning community...there is an atmosphere of trust." Deborah simply described it as a sense that the group "had really good feelings toward each other." Frank explained further:

> [To lead a discussion] I have to work hard to gain their trust. They've got to see me in roles other than being just inside the classroom. At games, and being involved and so forth. They've got to see that I'm a real person. Kids don't believe a teacher unless they see you are involved in other parts of their lives. I think they need to see that. I don't think I need that same trust for a lecture [as I do for a discussion]...Kids have got to trust me, and they have to trust each other. Because if they don't trust each other, then they will never share their real ideas.

When teachers want their students to share ideas and opinions during a discussion, they are acutely aware of the classroom community. For example, concerns about the effect of student diversity (explained previously) are often alleviated if teachers believe a group of students has developed an atmosphere of respect within the classroom. In other words, students might be very diverse in a number of areas but still engage in fruitful discussions if there is an underlying sense of respect and trust in the classroom. Deborah described what happened when a small group of twelve students lacked trust and respect for one another:

> I cannot see some of my students being able to interact [during discussions] because of the dynamics of them [the students]. I think it's just because they have this history. This anti-social kind of history. They've known one another, some of them, since they were eight, nine years old...And they have been together too long. So, they know each other's weaknesses just better than you can imagine. They know who they can pick on and who they can't. And they make one another's lives miserable.

Because teachers want their classroom to be a safe haven for sharing new ideas and opinions, they are concerned about the degree of personal safety their students feel in the classroom. When students suspect that comments made during a discussion may be mocked or used against them outside of class, they are less likely to share their ideas or opinions in class. While respect for classmates has some control over student behavior, concern about retribution outside of class seems to control some students more. Frank explained it this way:

> these guys are a little more careful maybe than they are in the suburbs...because think of the consequences in the middle of the city when a discussion goes from [civil interactions] to being an argument. Things could get dangerous. I think,

> maybe even subconsciously, these kids are aware of it. So, I rarely see shouting matches or arguments. And, when those occur, that's where it's gotten out of control. I would guess my classes are a lot nicer to each other than classes in suburbs. Because they've learned to be nice. It's kind of required... because the consequences of having a lot of anger can be really pretty destructive.

Another factor affecting classroom community is class size. As size increases, the sense of community decreases; a class with 35 students will not be as "close" (physically or socially) as a class with 15 students. Since teachers usually have classes with 25 to 30 students, discussion is not always the preferred method of instruction. Discussions do occur with as few as 2 students, but teachers believe the optimal number of students for a classroom discussion is between 5 and 20. This size offers the chance to hear diverse opinions about the topic, but is not so large that students are hesitant to speak because their sense of community is lessened. Bill's comments suggested this:

> I'm not sure you can lead a discussion with thirty-four people, that's one of the problems, I'm not sure you can do it with twenty-five. With fifteen, with ten, I think you can be much more successful.

5. Interest Level of Students

Students need to be interested in a topic in order to participate in a discussion on that topic, and they must believe that discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction. If teachers determine that their students will not be interested, then discussion is not used. Even if a discussion is planned, teachers seem willing to abandon it if student interest in the topic is low. Frank's comment is typical of the others':

> There are a variety of reasons [for low student interest]...Could be everybody is sleepy. Could be the topic is boring. Could be my prep wasn't good enough... My role is if I see that we are not going anywhere, there is no point in continuing. We will stop and do something else.

Cathy reported that she avoids using discussion when she believes that outside influences will distract students' attention. As she said, "Friday afternoon discussions will likely fail."

Elaine recalled that she stopped a discussion about the Missouri Compromise because her students "were not engaged in the discussion." She had them write a one-paragraph description of the account in the textbook instead, "because talking did not work. [The planned discussion] was a failure because they weren't interested in doing it." Alex explained that some students dislike classroom discussions because "they are looking for facts instead of asking 'why.'" Frank said he

often supplemented textbook accounts by telling stories to his students. He believed that "a lot of people just do not want to talk. They want to hear me recount a set of experiences."

Since students are integral to classroom discussions, teachers are willing to change their method of instruction (i.e., use a method other than discussion) when student interest is low. If many students are not participating, then teachers fear learning is not occurring, and alternative methods of instruction are used. When teachers believe student interest in a topic will be low, they often shun discussion and rely on what Elaine called "staying with the facts from the book."

Another strategy for overcoming a lack of student interest is to connect the discussion topic to issues the students enjoy. For example, school policies on smoking, dress codes, or school clubs are often interesting to students, and often provide fertile topics for discussion. Unfortunately, however, they usually have little relation to the curriculum of the course. Often what happens is a discussion that is interesting to the students, but not pertinent to course content.

Closely tied to student interest is the idea that students must believe discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction. Students who do not want to exert the effort needed for discussion, or who believe teacher-dominated instruction or seat/bookwork is the best way to be taught, pose a formidable challenge to teachers planning to use discussion. Deborah described how her "special ed" students came to class with what she called a

> lazy, uninterested attitude. You would think that here is the opportunity for anything, for discussion, for making sure everyone has their work done because they have similar classes through the day...It should be wonderful. It isn't. They think it is their time to unravel, to play games.

Frank claimed it was more difficult to use discussion in his advanced placement U. S. history class, than in his "regular" classes because

> the honors kids [advanced placement students] are paranoid about grades and become more nervous about discussion. They're not as open about it because they worry about the reading, and they worry about saying certain things that might be wrong more than the regular track kids.

He also said that his advanced placement students thought discussion was a waste of their class time because they saw it as a "filler" activity. When students do not see value in discussion, they will not be as willing to participate in it, and teachers feel pressure to use more teacher-led methods of instruction.

While teachers want all of their students to interact verbally with each other during classroom discussions, students who are silent can still benefit and may be learning from

discussion as much as those who are actively discussing. Alex, for example, believed that "twenty percent, maybe as much as thirty percent, tend to talk. They, tend to dominate the talk, and the others don't talk." He did not know how to get the "non-talkers" more active, but he did believe that students do not have to be talking in order to be learning. Listening to a discussion allows them to learn as well.

Teachers express two concerns about non-talking students, however. First, discussions are not easy or desirable if a limited number of people are talking. If a student likes to talk, then that student dominates the discussion, and multiple viewpoints are unavailable. Second, when students do not talk, there is no way of knowing whether they are engaged in the topic. They may be learning and thinking as much as those talking, or they may be completely disconnected from the conversation.

Summary of Factors Influencing Uses of Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion

Below are brief summaries of the five factors.

1. Student diversity. Teachers recognize that students in a classroom are not identical. They come together each class period with differences in cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability. Teachers see classroom diversity positively and negatively, and often weigh these differences when planning classroom discussions.

2. Lesson objectives. Discussion is considered to be a time-consuming method of instruction relative to other methods. As a result, teachers are more likely to dominate classroom interactions when the objectives of a lesson emphasize learning a specific body of information in a specific amount of time. Teachers who plan discussions so students will build their own understanding during the interactions allow for the extra time needed during discussions.

3. Age and maturity of students. Teachers do not use discussion in the same way across their several classes. They discriminate, more likely conducting discussion in classes that have what they call more "mature" students--students they describe as some combination of older, more knowledgeable, less defensive, and more socially adept. More maturity is needed when the purpose of the verbal interactions is to express different perspectives and increase the students' general understanding about a particular topic.

4. Sense of community in the classroom. The sense of community that teachers and students perceive in the classroom affects discussion. When teacher and students view the class as a community, they are more inclined to interact with one another. "Community" is comprised of

attributes such as: trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, an appropriate size of the group, and common goals for exploring issues and course-content together.

5. Interest level of students. In order for discussion to work in the classroom, students need to have an interest in the topic being discussed, and they must believe that discussion is a worthwhile method of instruction. Teachers consider very seriously their students' interest level in the discussion topic. If they determine a low level of interest, then discussion is not used. Likewise, if students do not value discussion as a method of instruction, then teachers will use less-interactive methods of instruction.

Implications

This study poses a number of implications for the classroom teacher, teacher education, and future educational research. Here, I focus on three implications of this study: The role of students' influence on teachers who plan and use discussion, teachers as discussion leaders, and suggestions for educating teachers about using classroom discussion.

Student Influences

Students are a powerful factor that influence teachers' actions. Teachers think about their students' ability and willingness to discuss when they decide if they will use discussion, and when they determine what type of discussion is most appropriate. Four of the five factors that influence the use of discussion were closely related to students' characteristics (student diversity, age and maturity of students, sense of community in the classroom, and interest level of students). Only one (lesson objectives) was directly related to course content. The perceptions teachers have of their students influence them in a number of ways. Teachers report that the need for student involvement during discussion leads them to think about their students when planning for discussion, and likely causes teachers to use methods of instruction that are less-dependent on student participation when students are judged unable, or unwilling, to discuss. Rather than defending the decision to use discussion, or requiring students to behave appropriately during a classroom discussion, teachers deferred to students, and moved away from discussion.

These findings elaborate prior conclusions that methods of instruction reflect teachers' desires to achieve and maintain classroom control. McNeil (1986) found that "defensive teaching" results when teachers fear they are losing control. Defensive teaching reduces course content to worksheets, lists, and "brief 'right' answers, easily transmitted, easily answered, easily graded" and easily controlled (p. 157). Metz (1978) noted that lower-achieving classes often received

structured written work, with little to no opportunities for verbal interactions, "as a device to quiet a class or to keep it calm" (p. 103). These may sometimes be wise practices, but they also may be largely illusory, based perhaps on race, ability-level, or other prejudices about a particular group of students. The teachers I interviewed reported that they did not use discussion when students neither valued it nor thought the analytical thinking it required was useful to their learning. In addition, teachers said they reduced their use of discussion in poorly-behaved classes because managing student behavior problems during the interactions was too difficult.

One final aspect of the influence of students on teachers and discussion was suggested when I explored differences between my two sets of teachers. When teachers were faced with a classroom of diverse students (as was often the case in the urban school), they recalled that classroom discussion was frequently used to build a sense of community in the classroom, and establish lines of communication among the students. When classrooms had less-diverse students (as was the case in the suburban school) teachers said that the objectives for discussion were more often focused on course content, and focused less on social or relational objectives. More, or less, student diversity in a classroom (i.e., differences in races, ethnicities, abilities, etc.) may affect the content and purpose of the discussions.

All of the teachers at the urban school emphasized discussion as a way to increase student-student relationships. Two of these teachers mentioned that the students in their classes needed classroom discussion more for the social benefits than for learning course content. The opposite was true with the suburban teachers. Those teachers each emphasized the role of discussion in providing information to students. They rarely used discussion to build social and relational skills among students.[3]

Teachers

There are several implications of this study for classroom teachers. First, teachers who use discussion can compare their own thinking about discussion with the influences described here. Awareness of the "student influence" could help teachers determine what factors are inhibiting or enhancing attempts to use discussion in their classrooms. Rather than deciding that discussion can not be used with a particular group of students, teachers might be able to identify what about the group hinders the discussion (e.g., lack of listening skills, too argumentative for fruitful exchanges

[3] Both suburban and urban teachers thought that discussion built knowledge. However, the conceptions of knowledge appeared to be different. The suburban teachers equated knowledge as "course content," while the urban teachers equated it more with "social ability."

of ideas, skepticism about the value of discussion as a method of instruction). Once identified, teachers could then concentrate on overcoming these hindrances rather than caving into them. Teachers might also begin to examine the origin of their perceptions about the factors that influence discussion. Perhaps teachers have biases about using discussion in a particular way, in a specific setting, or with a certain group of students.

A second implication for teachers has to do with the awareness that not all students talk during discussion. Though a number of reasons may account for limited participation, my findings suggest two: gender and intimidation. Let me briefly describe each. Before I do, the reader should remember that these are teachers' beliefs about student participation. Other teachers may want to interview their own students to evaluate the reliability of these reasons.

Gender. Teachers concur with research that girls tend to talk less than boys during class. Those teachers who recognized this trend in their discussions, and who tried to promote more gender-equitable discussions, reported some success. This indicates that teachers can help overcome gender bias, but it requires explicit talk in class about biases. Elaine's comment should be remembered by all teachers who teach with discussion: "Unless you teach the boys to listen to the girls, and teach the girls to speak, we won't lose the gender thing."

Intimidation. Teachers reported that intimidation was another reason students did not engage in discussions. Students who were lower in ability, culturally different, or had low proficiency in English often were self-conscious about their differences from the rest of the class, and did not verbally participate. Directing discussions with scripts and role-playing, or providing additional preparatory material to students who feel intimidated, might be ways to encourage participation by more students. Also, the atmosphere of the classroom is a powerful factor that should be considered. Teachers should ask themselves the following questions when considering whether the classroom atmosphere encourages or inhibits intimidation and gender bias: Do my students all believe this is a safe climate to share ideas? Is the class size appropriate for my purposes? Are comments respected and valued? Do my students share common goals for exploring issues and course-content together?

Teacher Educators

Teacher educators should model how to lead discussion, thinking out loud with their students about the decisions being made during a discussion session. If teachers are going to use discussion, they need to understand how to lead it, and have evidence that it will work with

students. Practice leading discussions seems important. Exploring various factors that influence discussion, and practicing ways to overcome them, could play an important part in preparing teachers to use classroom discussion. My sample of teachers used discussion frequently, but they were also experienced teachers, having led many discussions in many settings. Discussion is a valuable tool for teachers to have in their collection of instructional methods, especially in light of long standing calls for educators to teach problem-solving skills and to promote conceptual understanding of material. Using classroom discussion, however, is a difficult task for teachers. Instructing pre-service and in-service teachers explicitly about discussion, and the factors that influence discussion, could encourage its effective use in the classroom.

The teachers in my sample described ways that gender and student ability influenced discussion. Student differences other than these exist, and they likely influence discussion as well. For example, interactions among students of different races or ethnicities may affect classroom discussions. Teachers need to be asked directly if and how classroom discussions are affected when students differ in areas such as race, culture, or socioeconomic levels. Their responses might allow for a better understanding of potential factors that influence their use of discussion, and may provide insight into ways teachers might encourage more student participation, even when outside influences make discussion difficult.

Teacher educators and school administrators should consider teaching the discussion method because of its potential to enhance student learning and democratic citizenship. Through classroom discussions, students might develop abilities to interact with others about issues of common interest. This is critical for a democratic system of government that values input from its citizens. Students, thought of as citizens-in-process, might learn how to engage in discussions with classmates of different races, genders, social status, and abilities. Teaching future teachers about using discussion as a method of instruction is an important step in democratic citizenship education.

Conclusion

On the theoretical level, this study provides empirical support for models about conceptions of discussion, and specifically addresses possible factors that influence teachers' use of these conceptions in their classroom. This fills a gap in conceptual models of teachers' conceptions of discussion by offering knowledge grounded in data. If discussion is to be used in the classroom, then we must know what teachers think about it, how they plan to use it, what purposes it serves

in the classroom, and when they are likely to use or abandon using it for instruction. On the practical level, by establishing a basic set of influencing factors, this research allows teacher education, and the classroom teacher, to be on the "same page" conceptually when referring to discussion. The literature review of Wilen and White (1991) reveals that characteristics of discussion in the classroom are not widely known. It is important to develop some idea of what teachers envision as discussion and the influences on their use of it before descriptions of discussion in the classroom proceed much further.

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